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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 000790

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/30/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [ASEC](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: RED ANTI-GOVERNMENT PROTESTS CONTINUE, THAKSIN
LASHES OUT AT PRIVY COUNCIL

REF: 08 BANGKOK 3398 (LESE MAJESTE)

BANGKOK 00000790 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reason: 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

1. (C) Anti-government "redshirt" protests continue outside of the Government House compound in Bangkok. Addressing the demonstrators by video link the nights of March 27-28, former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra accused two leading Privy Councilors of directing the 2006 coup. The Privy Councilors publicly rebutted this accusation. A redshirt leader told us the protests would continue indefinitely; he hinted of further public denunciation of Palace figures and made cryptic allusions to other measures targeting Thaksin's foes. Red-affiliated taxi radio accused PM Abhisit of leading a "terrorist government," and red shirts assaulted at least two people wearing yellow shirts the morning of March 30.

2. (C) Comment: Many Thais will interpret Thaksin's public remarks as an effort to undermine the monarchy, through the Privy Council. Although an ally of Thaksin recently told us the former Prime Minister hopes to return to Thailand this year, he seems to be making it impossible to do so, barring revolutionary change. It remains unclear to us whether the government will prove as tolerant of the redshirts as the pro-Thaksin administrations were of the People's Alliance for Democracy in 2008; some of the redshirt rhetoric has been highly incendiary. We will stress our view that both sides should refrain from any acts of violence. End Summary and Comment.

PROTEST CONTINUES

3. (SBU) As of the mid-afternoon of March 30, police estimated 6,000 anti-government "redshirt" demonstrators remained outside of the Government House compound, an estimate in line with our Thai staff's on the scene head count. More than 3,000 police and 6,000 soldiers are on hand to protect the compound. Some government staff members were working at their offices in the compound, although high-ranking officials had relocated elsewhere and some offices closed entirely.

4. (SBU) An Embassy staff member who went to Government House

on March 30 observed that the redshirts appeared to control access to the compound; redshirts had refused access to military units interested in relieving the military companies inside the compound since March 25, before the rally began, although they allowed limited access on March 30. The redshirts had set up checkpoints on the streets, and covered a wider area than the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) had in 2008. All redshirt organizers or guards appeared unarmed; they are starting to develop the logistical support (food stations, free water, toilets) that allowed the PAD to conduct a long-term sit in at Government House from August-December 2008. The crowd of demonstrators appeared enthusiastic.

5, (SBU) Redshirt speakers were incendiary; one called for Thais to fight against what he termed a "terrorist government." (Note: Redshirt speeches have been broadcast on a Bangkok radio station known as "taxi radio," which is sympathetic to former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra.) Perhaps reflecting such aggressiveness, redshirts in the crowd around Government House assaulted two people passing by who were wearing yellow shirts (note: many Thai wear yellow on Monday; it does not necessarily denote association with the PAD).

THAKSIN ACCUSES PRIVY COUNCILORS

15. (SBU) Thaksin generated considerable controversy after appearing by video link on the nights of March 27 and 28 to directly accuse Privy Council President Prem Tinsulanonda and Privy Councilor Surayud Chulanont of planning the 2006 coup. Surayud subsequently publicly denied Thaksin's allegation, as did a staff member of Prem. Thaksin also has publicly

BANGKOK 00000790 002.2 OF 002

criticized Army Commander Anupong Paojinda for his role in the coup. (Anupong was not a member of the September 19 coup council, but he was one of the eight members of the Council for Democratic Reform's second incarnation, formally announced on September 29, 2006.)

16. (C) Thaksin also cited Piya Malakul, a confidante of the King and Queen, as a conspirator in the coup. At a March 28 dinner hosted by the Ambassador, Piya complained bitterly that Thaksin had grossly mischaracterized a pre-coup dinner that Piya hosted for other senior royalist figures. (On March 29, Piya publicly denied involvement in plotting the 2006 coup, stating that the dinner he hosted only discussed the general political situation in the country.)

17. (C) Thaksin's public statements come at an unusual time. An American political consultant who previously worked on behalf of Thaksin spoke with the Ambassador by phone on March 26. The consultant said that Thaksin believed that the Queen of Sweden was working with Queen Sirikit to help broker his return to Thailand. While Thaksin was careful not to attack the royal family in his public statements (saying that the Privy Councilors' maneuvering "misleads people into thinking the King is involved politically"), some Thais will interpret his denunciation of leading Privy Councilors as an indirect attack on the monarchy itself. Piya and others at the Ambassador's March 27 dinner, including Interior Minister Chaovarat Chanweerakul, said that Thaksin's remarks made any sort of compromise between Thaksin and the Palace impossible. Thaksin's blunt attacks, which appeared to violate unwritten rules of political discourse, left many senior Thais unsettled and bewildered.

CRACKDOWN RUMORS, AND RED PLANS

18. (C) We spoke by phone on the morning of March 30 with Jakrapob Penkair, one of the leaders of the redshirt movement. Jakrapob confirmed a report that we had heard from an NGO observer, that police had ordered the redshirts to

disperse early the morning of March 30. (Subsequently, however, a high-ranking police official told us there was no plan to disperse the protestors.) Jakrapob told us he believed that the authorities would not tolerate Thaksin's most recent comments, and he said that there would be more headlines to come, including details of Prem's coup-related activities and the role of certain banks in funding the PAD. Jakrapob termed this an "information offensive" by the redshirts. He also threatened that, were redshirt leaders to be arrested, "we wouldn't stop at Prem anymore," implying there would be direct criticism of the royal family. (Note: Some speakers on stage at redshirt rallies have directly criticized the monarchy in the past, and were charged with lese majeste as a result -- reftel. End Note.)

19. (C) Jakrapob made cryptic remarks to the effect that the redshirts would find ways to target (NFI) the leading figures who opposed them, or perhaps their family members. He noted the redshirts had planned extensively for the current situation, and he alluded to the recent upheaval in Madagascar as an example of the path Thailand might take; he implied that not all members of the security forces were loyal to their commanders. Jakrapob noted that the current government appeared illegitimate. We explained to Jakrapob that we considered the current government to be democratically-elected and legitimate, and we would not support any effort to bring about unconstitutional change. We also said that we would strongly discourage both sides from employing violence. We will try to meet with Jakrapob and other red leaders in person to reinforce this message in the near future.

JOHN